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Acquisition of the Article "The" by Persian Speakers

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Abstract

Persian language has no functional equivalents of the English article system and many Persian ESL learners have difficulty in using English articles, particularly the definite article "the". This study examined whether the accuracy of article use by the students varied with respect to the proficiency level and also investigated whether L1 plays role in corrects using article. The data were collected through two questionnaires. Statistical analyses of the participants' performance are: Analyzing English item and Persian item and analyzing both English and Persian item by comparing with each other and comparing proficiency level. The result shows there is a significant difference among the proficiency levels in the term of using corrects article in the English items. The advanced student tried to avoid substitution "the" with "a".

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1. Introduction

The English article system is one of the most difficult structural areas for EFL learners and always EFL learners make errors in article use. An issue that is of considerable interest in both L1 and L2 acquisition research is whether the lack of article production is because of the absence of the underlying functional structure or the other factors affect article choice. Other factors are more discourse-based, as with the notion of preferentially (Thomas, 1989, and Huebner 1985). For example, when a count noun is deployed in discourse for the first time, it should be preceded by "a/an"; however, for later mentions, it may be marked with "the". For example, in the sentence "I saw a book near the library. I took the book and carried it to the library" the speaker indicates that the library has already been

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previously mentioned and is an established referent while the book is not. However, in the second sentence, the noun "book" is used with "the" as it is now a known referent.

Another important factor is that L1 transfer most likely plays a role in L2 learners' acquisition of English articles. Especially, when there is no article system equivalent to the English system such as Persian.

The difficulties of myself and my classmates inspired me to investigate and analyze this problem in order to determine how Persian EFL learner use article.

This study will address the following questions:

1. What type of errors do Persian EFL learners commit in use of articles?
2. Do they tend to omit the articles?
3. Do they tend to substitute the articles?
4. Does the accuracy of article use by Persian EFL learners vary with respect to proficiency level?

This study hypothesized that if native speakers (Persian speakers) know the usage of their article system (in Persian); it will help them to have no problem in English. On the one hand, are L2 errors the same as L1 error?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. previous studies related to acquisition of article

The article system is one of the issues that has been discussed by philosophers (Christophersen, 1939; Hewson, 1972; Kramsky, 1972; Russell, 1905) and linguists (Jespersen, 1933/1966; Perlmutter, 1970), as well as psychologists; it shows that the articles are important subjects in discourse processes, interactions of linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge.

Most researches on article acquisition in ESL falls into two areas: 1- pedagogy and its effectiveness 2- the process of acquisition.

Although some earlier studies (Christophersen, 1939; Jespersen, 1949) made significant contributions to understanding of the issue, Bickerton's (1981) work was "arguably the most important and enlightening, as it renders a new and unique systematic approach to the analysis of the use of the English article system." (Liu and Gleason, 2002, P. 2)

According to Bickerton, the use of the English articles "a/an", "the", and "zero" is governed by the semantic function of the noun phrase in discourse. Function of the noun phrase is classified into two types: 1- whether a noun is a specific referent, 2- whether the hearer knows the referent.

(Master, 2002) outlines three main reason that help explain why acquiring English articles are difficult for non-native speakers:

- (a) "a/an", "the", and "zero" are the most frequent function words occurring in discourse,
- (b) Most often function words are unstressed in speech that's why non-native speakers can't recognize them in conversation; and
- (c) Selecting the correct article requires the consideration of various factors, including definiteness, count ability, and number.

(Master, 2002) showed that knowledge of information structure was effective in teaching articles to L2 English speakers. According to information structure, given information is replaced with a pronoun or marked with the articles "Ø" or "the" or another central determiner (e.g. some, this, any). By contrast, new information is marked with the article "Ø" or "a" or another central determiner (e.g. my, her, each, either, this). His study included 48 native Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, Arabic, Thai, and Vietnamese students that were divided in three groups. Each group was exposed to three different treatments: (a) instruction of article use based on information structure, (b), a traditional prescriptive explanation, and (c) no instruction. The two groups (a & b) were each taught from two different perspectives for three hours over a three-week period. The first group was taught on the basis of information structure, and the second group was taught a traditional explanation of the article system focusing on the count/non-count distinction, the definite/indefinite distinction, the effect of post-modification on article choice, and the generic/specific distinction. A month later, the participants completed a cloze exercise in which they were supposed to fill the blank spaces of a given text with the correct article using the guidance to which they were exposed during the three-week period. His findings showed that group (a) who was taught information structure as

overarching guiding principles showed greater improvement (a mean score of 1.933) than the two other groups ("b" averaged a 1.235 and "c" a 0.668). Master (2002) suggests that applying information structure framework to selecting the correct article helps non-native speakers to gain control of the English article system. (Khoshgowar, 2010)

(Ekiert, 2004, p. 64) studied the order of acquisition of articles by twenty Polish adult learners, including ten learners of ESL, ten learners of EFL, and five native English speakers as a control group. The non-native participants were in three levels in each group: three of low ability, three of intermediate ability, and four of high ability. She used a cloze test consisting of seventy-five deleted obligatory uses of "a/an", "the", or zero, and based on referentiality distinctions made by Huebner (1983, p.70) and Thomas (1989, p 32), she found that Polish ESL/EFL learners make errors even in more advanced stages of acquisition. Her subjects at both higher levels of proficiency (intermediate-ability and high-ability) overused zero articles while the definite article "the" and the indefinite article "a" were over generalized by intermediate speakers more than by the advanced participants. According to the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, articles are marked features in Polish compared to English because Polish lacks an article system while articles exist in English; therefore, it is difficult for Polish learners to acquire the system of articles in English. (Khoshgowar, 2010)

In a comparable study, Thomas (1989) describes similarities and differences between L1 learners and L2 learners in terms of acquiring English articles. His participants were thirty adult [Japanese (N=13), Chinese (N=6), Korean (N=3), Spanish (N=2), Italian (N=2), German (N=1), French (N=1), and Greek (N=1)] ESL learners who had lived in the USA for 2-30 months and completed an English language program. In his study, he used a picture description task in pairs. One participant described one of four pictures and the other participant listened to the description and determined which picture was described. Thomas analyzed his data based on the preferentiality of the nouns and compared his findings to Cziko's (1986) research concerning L1 acquisition of English articles. Thomas (1989) found that his adult L2 learners used the indefinite article "a/an" in referential indefinite contexts (+SR-HK); while child L1 learners frequently use the definite article "the" (and which is considered the "incorrect" choice). In addition, adult L2 learners overused the definite article "the" in referential indefinite context (+SR-HK). Thomas, furthermore, compared acquisition of the English articles between learners whose languages have an article system (+Art), and learners whose languages lack an article system (-Art). His findings showed that both (-Art) and (+Art) learners used "the" 81% and 97% appropriate in (+SR+HK) environments. The use of "a" was less accurate for both (-Art) and (+Art), while (-Art) learners produced "Ø" more frequently in indefinite and definite contexts than (+Art) learners did. Both (-Art) and (+Art) learners employed "the" in (-SR-HK) more than in (+SR-HK) contexts.

Another interesting finding from Master's (1995) study is that the frequently missed "the" was largely the result of the subjects' not knowing that certain NPs were unique in the speech community. In other words, most of their errors were related to what we consider unique referent or cultural use of the definite article. This finding would imply that certain uses of the definite article might be more difficult than others, an issue that none of the existing studies seem to have investigated.

Faghih (1997) believes the article context of discourse make the meaning clear; for example "medad" would either "pencil" or "the pencil" based on context. He further comments on the lack of any single word in Persian corresponding exactly to English definite article "the". He speculates that the acquisitions of "the" will be difficult for Iranian students.

2.2 L1 Transfer

Although Thomas (1989) proposed universal developmental stages, others (Master, 1997; Zobl, 1982) have argued that articles are an area where L1 transfer affects acquisition. Zobl (1982) synthesized previous research on child L2 learners of English, particularly Huang's (1971) study of a five-year-old male Chinese speaker with a three-year-old male Spanish speaker discussed in Hernández-Chávez' (1977) study. Both had learned English in a pre-school setting. Zobl found that the Chinese speaker uses the demonstrative *this* where a native speaker would use *the* while the Spanish-speaking boy was able to correctly interchange the determiners *this* and *that*. Zobl concludes that learners who have the developmental feature in their L1 have a grammatical advantage when they learn the target feature since they already have a similar system of marking in their L1. He then accounts for them

having a similar developmental path by explaining that learners with the feature in their L1 do not have to create a mental category for the L2 feature but only have to restructure the specific features of that category for the L2.

Master (1997) agrees, suggesting that [-art] L1 learners are approximately one stage behind [+art] learners. He analyzed data spoken data from twenty English learners and found that the learners from [-art] L1s initially oversupply \emptyset in obligatory contexts and then after realizing that \emptyset is not always accurate, switch to using "the" with all nouns. However, [+art] L1 learners begin by overusing "the". He summarizes saying, "This can be interpreted to mean that it takes about one interlanguage level for a [-art] learner to become aware that such a thing as an article system exists" (Master, 1997, p. 218).

In contrast, Chaudron and Parker (1990) found that there was not a significant difference between learners from different language backgrounds. In their literature review, they analyzed previous studies on L2 article acquisition (Andersen, 1977; Parrish & Tarone, 1988) and concluded that learners follow universal developmental sequences, regardless of their L1. They did not compare the developmental stages or proficiency levels, but rather focused on how the topic and discourse contexts affected learners' use of articles. Chaudron and Parker's study compared spoken data from Japanese learners and English native speakers, finding that the learners encoded definiteness before indefiniteness. However, they did not compare Japanese learners with other English learners.

Since Persian has an article system, but according to Faghih (1997) has no article system equivalent to the English system, this study has a relation with Thomas' and Master's studies.

3. The Use of The

3.1. English

It is accepted that the use of article "the" falls into two major categories: Generic and Non-generic use (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Hawkins, 1978). The generic use of "the" refers to cases where it is used to mean either a species, a race, or people of a nation. It is usually used with a singular noun, as in "The German is very athletic", although it may also be used, as some grammarians (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman; Christophersen, 1939) suggested, with plural nouns, as in "The Germans are very athletic". All other uses of "the" are considered non-generic, which makes its use much wider and more frequent than the generic use. Furthermore, the generic use of the in most instances can be replaced by the indefinite article a/an if the noun is singular or substituted by the zero articles if the noun is plural. On the other hand, the non-generic use of "the" cannot be replaced (in the case of a singular noun) or deleted (in the case of a plural noun). Furthermore, the non-generic use of "the" is much more complex and hence more problematic for ESL students than the generic use. Quite a few scholars (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman; Christophersen; Hawkins; Quirk et al.) have wrestled with the difficult issue of classifying the complex uses of the.

(Liu and Gleason, 2002) investigated only the acquisition of the definite article by ESL students. They identified four types of the non-generic uses as:

1. Cultural use (i.e. The Moon is full today),
2. Situation use (i.e. Can you pass me the newspaper?),
3. Structural use (i.e. Do you know the pilot who flies this airplane?),
4. Textual use (i.e. I saw a man in a car across the street. At first I wasn't sure, but then I realized that the man driving the car was a friend of mine).

3.2. Persian

In Persian, nouns are divided into two groups: common noun and concrete noun. Common nouns are divided into: definite, indefinite and specific categories.

The definite noun phrase is known to both hearer and speaker that is both have a certain individual in mind; for example:

ketab- ra xaandam
(I read the book).

The book here is known to speaker and hearer. In Persian definite is called "moaerefe". The suffix –ra is the marker for the definiteness and is placed after definite word and is used with generic nouns too. (Givy & Anvary, 1379)

4. Method

4.1. Subjects

This study was carried out among 30 academic students who have not yet complete their Bachelor's degrees are in senior year of their English Translation major at an Institute of Higher Education.

They are both male and female and from all age groups between 22 and 27. All had, however, studied English for a longer or shorter period, generally beginning at secondary school. Some of them (16 students) had studying English in institution for average 8.68 months. One of the students had IELTS (6) score.

I gave them a bio-data questionnaire. The participants were asked to indicate the number of years they had studied English, whether they taught in English, these items were not subsequently included in the data analysis, since some of them were incomplete or unreliable e.g. some respondents calculated the time since they began studying English at school, which may have been 10 years ago. However, it was thought unlikely that the participant had actually been studying English for the whole of the previous 10 years. That's why I had to test their proficiency to recognize they real knowledge of English. For the purposes of this investigation, the English proficiency level of the participants was determined according to the reported scores obtained in online site available at <http://www.transparent.com/learn-english/proficiency-test.html>. Those who got lower 60% were placed at intermediate level and if they got upper 60% were placed in advanced level.

All tables should be numbered with Arabic numerals. Every table should have a caption. Headings should be placed above tables, left justified. Only horizontal lines should be used within a table, to distinguish the column headings from the body of the table, and immediately above and below the table. Tables must be embedded into the text and not supplied separately. Below is an example which the authors may find useful.

Table 1. Participants Information.

	N.	Age rang
Intermediate	17	22-27
Advanced	13	23-26

4.2. Instrument

The questionnaire consists of 35 items in English and 35 items in Persian including both definite and indefinite articles. The English items adapted from Teaching English Article System by Peter Master and The Persian items adapted from Dastor Zaban Farsi Part 1&2 by Amad Givy & Anvary. The definite item which used to analyze of research are 30 items in both Persian and English questionnaire with some sentences containing one and others containing more. The other items (some sentences no need to "the" or "a" and some just need "a") were included as distracters or control item. The order of the items in the test was random. After the instrument was completed, the English items was given to 5 native speakers of English (three ones live in UK and two ones live in Australia) as a pilot test through e-mail. Although none of the native speakers produced the unnecessarily, a few did miss "the" in 3 places where I expected it.

4.3. Procedure

Participants were contacted personally. The test was administered to the learners in a classroom environment. Prior to the test, the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. They fill the bio-data, and then they were given a brief explanation to facilitate the administration of the task, and requested to complete the questionnaire. The learners were asked to insert the wherever deemed necessary and respondents were instructed

to complete it without referring to any other materials. They were told to leave the correct sentences if they believed it is not necessary to adding any. They were not allowed to use dictionary. The questionnaire was completed individually by participants in their own time; no time limit was set however they took approximately 40 minutes to complete it.

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis in the present study is divided in three parts. The first section covers the results obtain from the English task which the findings categorize in to three groups, Correct, Substitution or No answer, and Overuse for intermediate and advanced. Second part analyzes the result obtains from Persian task that categorize the same. The third part refers to analyzing data in both languages and comparing them.

5.1. In English

Data was first analyzed to obtain descriptive statistics for all answered per categories of overuse, correct, Substitution or no answer and level of proficiency.

The result of Overuse shows that in intermediate group the percentages (19.49%) of the student who make mistake in providing articles are more than the percentage (9.01%) of the ones who are to recognize correct articles in advanced group. It may because of their difference in proficiency level.

Table 2, Distribution of THE

	Total visible use of article THE	
	Advanced n. 13	Intermediate n. 17
Correct	334	368
Overuse (Error)	41	116
Substitution with a or no answer	80	111
total	455	595

The percent of Substitution or No answer in intermediate and advanced, 18.65% and 17.58% shows that both group prefers to omit the or substitute with a. The result suggests that deletion of the article poses the greatest problem among the learners and this is because we don't have any equivalent for the definite article the in Persian.

According to percent of correct use of the (73.40%) and Overuse (9.01%), it seems that the advanced group has performed better than the beginner group. It suggests that correct usage is related to the proficiency level.

Chart 1, Percent of Overall use of THE



5.2 In Persian

Here again, data was first analyzed to get descriptive statistics for all answers per categories of overuse, correct, Substitution or no answer and level of proficiency

Table 3. Distribution of moarefe

	Advanced	Intermediate
Correct	415	537
Wrong	32	56
Substitution with nakare or No answer	8	2
total	455	595

The result of correct answer in both groups shows that there is no significant difference between them to recognizing correct answer.

According to the percent of mistake and percent of no answer in advanced group rather than intermediate group, it suggest that advanced group preferred to leave answer blank when they thought they make a mistake.

Chart 2, Percent of Overall use of moarefe

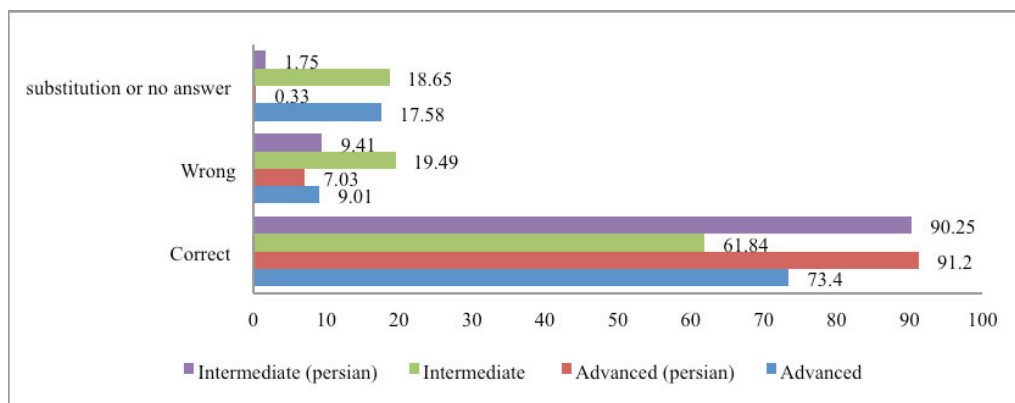


5.3 In Persian and English

The comparison between finding data in Persian and English shows however, Persian EFL learner can recognize definite in Persian but they cannot perform better in English. It is most significant in intermediate group; they have good performance in Persian rather than English.

Intermediate group made more mistakes in English. It shows intermediate group has more problem in recognizing the usage of the in English item rather than in Persian items. However, there was no significant difference in among of mistake in Persian and English items in advanced group.

Chart 3, Comparison between L1 and L2



6. Discussion

6.1 Conclusion

It appeared that the students committed both omission and substitution errors in English and very rare in Persian items. It may be due to the interference of their L1 that is why students prefer to use 'a' instead of 'the' or sometimes omit it. As it was mentioned earlier, the definite marker is absent in Persian but Persian speakers know the semantic feature of specificity.

The results presented in chart 3 indicate the variety and frequency of the errors varied with respect to the level of the students. According to the result, there is a significant difference among the proficiency levels in the term of supplying the correct article in the English items. The more advanced student is more accurate rather than intermediate in using the.

Since there is no research on the use of English articles by beginner, intermediate and advanced Persian EFL learners, the results of this study cannot be compared.

The advanced student tried to avoid substitution 'the' with 'a'. They more preferred to leave it no answer or omit it in both Persian and English items.

However, the application of definite marker 'the' in all types of definite contexts in both tasks is high in intermediate and advanced proficiency groups. It shows that the participants could recognize the value of specificity to that of definiteness.

Finally, with reference to the answer of student, it can be understood that there are other factors that were shown to influence accuracy in article choice. Other factors included information status such as known, brand new and anchored, preferentially and number with count nouns that I didn't examine in this study.

5.2 Suggestions to Further Research

In future research, data should be collected from more than 30 students since it is difficult to make generalizations with a small number of participants and also the questionnaire should consist of more than 35 items including an equal number of examples of the four categories of use for the definite article.

Moreover, the present research categorized the participants into two levels: a) intermediate b) advanced with an online proficiency test that can't be reliable. To conduct similar research in the future, it would be of interest to have participants at three levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced). These levels could be distinguished by taking a Standard English language proficiency test.

In addition, longitudinal case studies on the acquisition of English articles by Persian EFL learners can be carried out. With the help of these studies, it would be possible to see the learners' progress in the acquisition of the English articles the, and it would be possible to make generalizations about the order of acquisition of the English articles by Persian EFL learners.

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